

COVID-19 and Herd Immunity



What is Herd Immunity?

Herd immunity is when a large portion of the population becomes immune to a disease, making the spread of disease from person to person much less likely. Because the disease cannot spread, the whole population becomes protected—not just those who are immune.

How is Herd Immunity Achieved?

There are two possible ways to achieve herd immunity for COVID-19—vaccines and infection. COVID-19 vaccination is an ideal approach to achieve herd immunity. All COVID-19 vaccines currently available in the United States have been shown to be highly effective at preventing serious illness from COVID-19 and are an important tool to help end the pandemic.

Getting COVID-19 may offer some natural protection. Current evidence suggests that reinfection with the virus that causes COVID-19 is uncommon in the 90 days after initial infection. However, experts don't know for sure how long this protection lasts, and the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19 far outweighs any benefits of natural protection.

When Can We Achieve Herd Immunity?

The percentage of people who need to be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity varies by disease. For example, herd immunity against measles, which is easily spread from person to person, requires about 95% of a population to be vaccinated; for polio, the vaccination rate needed is about 80%.

To safely achieve herd immunity against COVID-19, a substantial proportion of a population needs to be vaccinated to reduce the virus spread in the whole population. At this time, the exact proportion of the population that must be vaccinated against COVID-19 for herd immunity is not known.

If enough people are immune to COVID-19 through vaccination or natural immunity, the virus has fewer pathways to spread.

